

Trends and Challenges in Communication Research: Searching for the Fresh Insights to Understand the Vibrant of Communication Phenomenon

Hermin Indah Wahyuni

Department of Communication, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences
University of Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

This paper examines the research development in communication as social science. It is done through the analysis of three trends. They include trends of society as context for the development of communication studies; trends for the developing theory of communication studies; and trends in methodology issues. The meanings of 'communication' are complex and vary with the field it is being used, whether this is media and communication studies, cybernetics, information technology studies, or psychology, and so any definition is merely a beginning of the process of understanding the term. Along with intertwine of communication studies with other social sciences; the development of research in communication studies faces an interesting dynamic, trends and challenges.

Keywords: communication, theory and methodology

Introduction

Communication is a very dynamic and vibrant study. As a part of social sciences, communication is strongly effected by social perspectives and characters of social science. Social science strongly influenced by positivist perspectives in one sides and humanistic perspectives in others. Communication science usually is claimed as science with no discipline or multi perspectives science. The communication is continuously progress for understanding many tendency and phenomenon. It could be noted that there has been very little general, systematic examination in the specific context of communication. Paradigms and methodological procedures used by communication researchers have been borrowed from engineering, statistics, economy, politics and system science and applied to the study of specific communication situations.

Therefore, various approaches to this study becomes as the specific characteristic of communication science as the discipline. Communication is a multi paradigmatic discipline, and this is nothing to be ashamed of. Since Heisenberg (1930), philosophers of science have largely rejected the positivist ideal of a single knowable true representation of reality (see Vanlear, 1996).

Research is a process without a final ideal or ultimate end state. Research in communication is the key of the development of science itself. It's an important process of inquiry in communication. Inquiry is the systematic study of experience that leads to understanding, knowledge, and theory (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008: 7). Research much related to the second stage of inquiry (the first stage is asking question, the second stage is observation, the third stage is constructing answers), namely observation. Here the communication scholar looks for answers

by observing the phenomenon under investigation. The various of planned methods and theory are integral part of answering the questions posed by communication. The challenge of the research in communication science is finding the new understanding or offering the fresh insights in interpreting the communication issues. Regarding this issue, it could happen that some communication scholars using the different approaches result the different interpretation for the single communication phenomenon.

The main topic of this paper-trends and challenges in communications research-will be thrashed out in detail by three groups of issues, first, trends of society as context for the development of communication science; second, trends for the developing theory of communication science; and third, trends in methodology issues.

Trends of Society as Context for the Development of Communication Science

The growth of science and knowledge is really effected by the trends in society that usually become the context of the development of science, in national and global circumstances. The developing civilizations which unite the whole world in one global context accelerate the information flow. Thus, in the global science context there come some challenges for the communication scholar. The challenge is to communicate and inform the researches they've done and to give specific context to each characteristic of the science developing.

The mainstream trends are:

1. **The transition from Industrial/modernist society to the Postmodernist society or information society or knowledge society leads to challenges for better understanding the information society**

Now we are engaging very intense with the issue of information society or post industrial society (Webster, 2002). The involvement of communication researcher for searching and creating better understanding in this new phenomenon is still the main issue. In this context there are many opportunity and potency that is still need to explore in answering various characteristic detail of the society. More specific in mass media domain, McQuail concerns about several things that has to be concerned for the contemporary mass media scholars:

... the most general need is to develop about an information society or a network society which would be less speculative and more analytically useful than those currently in circulation. We need to know what the relevant networks are and how they are organized. ..Secondly, we need to explore the question on freedom as promised by certain features of new media. Are they really "technologies of freedom" or will they be subject to the same constraints as the old media and serve as even more effective means of control and social containment? Thirdly, we may ask what the interactivity of new media really amounts to, beyond its technological...(2000, pp.481-483)

McQuail's statement offers some new headings of theory-in the same time in research development – about new media. They are:

- Information society
- Social and communication networks
- Freedom or containment?
- Interactivity
- Experience of use
- Responsibility and trust
- New critical theory?

McQuail's explanation shows that the issues about traditional mass media character and the new media with its whole new character are very potential and

very available to be explored.

Communication Revolution: Crisis in communication, crisis for society?

From the critical perspective, Robert Mc Chesney pointed out that nowadays society live in "in the midst of a communication and information revolution." Further he stresses out that a digital revolution is unfolding that will touch all aspects of our lives - economics, politics, culture, organizations, and interpersonal relationships. Whatever system emerges will shape the future for better or worse. At stake is the prospect of a more democratic communications system and society or whether a huge opportunity will be lost. Communication is central to democratic theory and practice with new technologies becoming society's "central nervous system" in ways previously unimaginable. McChesney states the opportunity powerfully: "No previous communication revolution (has had as much) promise (to let) us radically transcend the structural communication limitations for effective self-government and human happiness (in) human history" (in Lendman, 2008).

Related with this topic Chesney criticizes the communication scholars in US and their contribution as part of the solution of the condition that he called as "*critical juncture*." This term refers to the situation in which the old institutions and practices are ending, however what will replace them is still undetermined, and once something new is established it will be hard to change for decades or generations. McChesney believes there's a gaping chasm between the role of the media and communication in society and it's reached a crisis stage. His solution: engaged scholarship on the issues because what happens in academia affects everyone! Within the context of communication

scholar in USA, Chesney criticizes those communication scholars in US since the mid-1980s has settled for a "second-tier role in US academic life." It's been undistinguished by too little research even though there are scores of dedicated people in the field

What Chesney describe above show that the involvement of the researcher in communication science is fundamental since they become as a part of the solution from the crisis in communication and for society. "The critical juncture" happened not only in US, however in many parts of the world and become the real challenge for communication scholars. This issue related to the economy-political issue, media politics issue, media regulation and placed communication as part of the essential element of public policy.

Trends for the Developing Theory of Communication Science

Communication scholars have many approaches for mapping the theory. The literature and leading textbook for communication theory show these tendencies. Robert T Craig presents seven traditions as a way of looking at and reflecting on the communication field in a holistic ways. Craig divides the world of communication theory into seven traditions: (1) the semiotic; (2) the phenomenological; (3) the cybernetic, (4) the sociopsychological; (5) the sociocultural; (6) the critical; and (7) the rhetorical (see Craig & Muller [ed.], 2007). Littlejohn and Foss apply these seven traditions to describe theories of human communication, which is more focus on several issues: the communicator, the message, the conversation, the relationship, the group, the organization, the media and the culture and society (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008:33). In another literature,

EM Griffin divides the theory of communication within five domains: interpersonal communication, group and public communication, mass communication, cultural context, and integration. Kathrin Miller presents four main points when describing the theory, there are the perspective of theory, theories of communication processes, and theories of communication contexts.

In theoretical perspective, two trends could be seen: firstly, new alternative in perspectives and discursive features (the critical and dialogic perspectives enrich the understanding of communication phenomenon); and secondly, the

effort to contextualize the theory. Further detailed are below:

a. **New alternative in Perspectives and Discursive Features**

In general, there are at least three main perspectives or paradigms in social science (post-positivistic, interpretive, and critique) that enrich communications study in many context (see Miller, 2005, pp.20-56). However, nowadays, there is a 'dialogic perspective' that grows beside the other three. This perspective known also 'as the post-modernist' and it offers new freshness in reading and interpret the discourse of communication

Table 1
Prototypical Discursive Features

Issue	Normative	Interpretive	Critical	Dialogic
Basic goal	Lawlike relations among objects	Display unified culture	Unmask Domination	Reclaim Conflict
Method	Nomothetic science	Hermeneutics, ethnography	Cultural criticism, Ideology Critique	Deconstruction, Genealogy
Hope	Progressive Emancipation	Recovery of Integrative Value	Reformation of Social Order	Claim a Space for Lost Voices
Methapor of social relations	Economic	Social	Political	Mass
Problems addressed	Inefficiency, Disorder	Meaninglessness, Illegitimacy	Domination, Consent	Marginalization, Conflict, Suppression
Time identity	Modern	Premodern	Late modern	Postmodern
Mood	Optimistic	Friendly	Suspicious	Playful

Source: Deetz, Stanley, Conceptual Foundations, at Fredric M. Jablin and Linda Putnam, (2001). *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication Advances in Theory, Research, and Methods*. Sage Publication: California, p.17, cited selective by some highlights.

The Discourse of Normative Studies

The researchers producing this discourse have been described as functionalist, covering-law theorists, or simply practicing the variable analytic tradition. Emphasize the centrality of codification, the search for regularity and normalization, and the implied prescriptive claims. Theory and theory testing are central to the logic of the research and many of the statistical procedures of data reduction. Examples: System theory, covering law.

The Discourse of Interpretive Studies

Most interpretivists have taken culture to be an evocative metaphor. The basic function of interpretive work is to translate the interest and concerns of one people into the interests and concerns of another.

The Discourse of Critical Studies

Critical research aims at producing dissensus and providing forums for and models of discussion to aid in the building of more open consensus. Of the four orientations, critical studies have the most explicit attention to moral and ethical issues. Examples: ideology critique, communicative action.

The Discourse of Dialogic Studies

Some people claim that dialogic studies are similar with the postmodernist studies. Dialogic perspectives are based in a recent set of philosophical writings originating most often in France. Of greatest interest are the writings emphasizing political issues and conceptions of fragmentation, textuality, and resistance. Dialogic research emphasizes dissensus production and the local/situated nature of understanding. Seven themes will be dominant (Deetz in Jablin & Putnam, 2001):

1. The Centrality of discourse, emphasizing language as systems of distinctions that are central to social construction processes

2. Fragmented identities, demonstrating the problem of an autonomous, self determining individual as the origin of meaning
3. The critique of the philosophy of presence, focusing an on object indeterminacy and the constructed nature of people and reality
4. The loss of foundations and master narratives
5. The knowledge/power connection, examining the role of claims of expertise and truth in systems of domination
6. Hyperreality, emphasizing the fluid and hyperreal nature of the contemporary world and role of mass media and information technologies
7. Research as resistance and indeterminacy, stressing research as important to change processes and providing voice to that which is lost or covered up in everyday live

It could be said that differences in discourse give insights into the diverse communication phenomenon. Each orientation theory creates a vision of communication problems and tries to address them.

b. The Contextualization of the Issues

Although there is a strong tendency to global issue, in another side the contextualization of the theory is also grow up. Many key concepts would be understood from many points of views and invite open discussion from different perspectives and contexts. For example, in understanding the economy-politics issue many regions show the characteristic and streams that present the multifarious perspectives. Each region such as North America, Europe, and developing nations contribute to the contextualization of economy political issue, as shown in Table 2.

Tabel 2.
The differences of Economy – Political Perspectives in Three Regions

North America	Europe	Third Countries
<p>Injustice that communication industry has become an integral part of a wider corporate order which is exploitative and undemocratic</p> <p>A large literature on industry-and class specific manifestations of transnational corporate and state power</p> <p>On going struggles for change the dominant media and to create alternatives</p>	<p>Connected to movements for social change, particularly the defense of public service media systems</p> <p>Concerned to integrate communication research within various neo-marxian theoretical traditions</p>	<p>Media were resources which, along with urbanization, education, and other social forces, stimulate progressive economic, social, and cultural modernization</p> <p>The failure of development schemes incorporating media investment sent modernization theorist in search of revised models that have tended to incorporate telecommunication and new computer technologies into the mix</p>

Source: Vincent Mosco. (1996). *The political Economy of Communication, Rethinking and Renewal*. Sage Publications: London, pp. 74-115.

For the future, the contextualization becomes stronger, mainly in global issues that were precipitated by the media. In context of media studies and cultural studies the communication researcher will engage with the effort to contextualize the media, culture, or popular culture issues.

c. Methodology Issues

Simply put, 'research' is the process of asking

questions and finding answers. However, research is more than this. It involves systematic exploration, guided by well constructed questions, producing new information or reassessing old information. Through the application of critical analytical skills to information, the researcher is able to transform it into knowledge, so the researcher needs a way to understand what 'knowledge' is, to recognize and assess knowledge, and to fit new knowledge into old knowledge.

In the beginning, communication research trends are filled with many researches which use structuralism positivist approach with systematic and objective quantitative method. In the next progress, at least started in 1980s, the communication journal is filled with qualitative approach which prior the thick description and explanation of an object (Kamhawi & Weaver in Wimmer & Dominick, 2006: 115).

For the next trends, it seems like the dichotomy limits between quantitative and qualitative methods will be no longer be the main issue. But in the contrary, there will be a trend where research use 'blended methodology': the blending between quantitative and qualitative methods. Then we hope there will be new synergy when each strength and weakness of each methodology has been combined. Wimmer and Dominick used the term "triangulation" referring to the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods to fully understand the nature of research problem, particularly in the mass media field (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006: 50).

In the future the methods for collecting data were characterized by supporting the new technology. A variety of tools such as internet or others technology make the research easier in many aspects. Wimmer and Dominick highlighted the importance of the internet for helping and facilitate the communication scholars (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006: xi). Previously Watt and Vanlear show measurement of Continuous Response Measurement (CRM) which is based on the microcomputer, a set of electronic components designed to measure momentary shifts in cognition during message processing. This technology usually applies in describing the audience response measures in television viewing (West & Biocca in

Watt & VanLear, 1996: 119-144). Therefore the fluidity of using of the methodology and the support of technology will make the research in communication science more comprehensive and holistic to understand the object of the study.

Reconciliation and Complementary Research Needed?

The trends and challenge that have been discussed above shows that the emerging of new trends related to communications issue, theory aspect, and methodologies issues is a dynamic that shows communication is moving, progressing, and developing its scientific concept.

The strength of critique and dialogue perspective in the development of communication theory should not be understood as a movement that shifts the post positivist views in weak position. In the contrary, this position actually is a way where communication's scholar can read and stick to the complex of communication phenomena. Theory, methodology, and discourse will keep moving. And debate between those elements must be understood in a synergy frame between each other. As Mc Quail (2000: 479-480) states that:

...the dispute between "culturalist" and scientific-empiricists has generated lights as well as heat, and the same is true of the disagreement between radical-critical researchers and conservative functionalist. Each issue brings its own spirit. And each of them of course will enrich every topic. The scholars in communications get some challenges to become a part of the dynamic society that grows rapidly, especially with support of communication technology. Responding to that challenges, then the theory development, methodology aspect, will be very valuable and contribute to the communication

development, in academic and social context. Searching for the reconciliation between theoretical, paradigms or methodological opposites lead to better understanding the communication phenomenon. The communication scholars should have deep commitments, multi perspectives and multilingual, that could move across orientations with ease. Multiperspectivalism often leads to shallow readings and invites unexamined basic assumptions; therefore doing good work within orientations still must be prized first.

References:

- Craig, R. T. & Muller, H. L. (ed.). (2007). *Theorizing communication, reading across traditions*. London: Sage Publications.
- Jablin, F. M. & Putnam, L. (2001). *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication Advances in Theory, Research, and Methods*. California: Sage Publication.
- Lendman, S. 2008. Global Research [online]. Available at www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=LEN20080122&articleId=7873 [accessed at 15 May 2009]
- Littlejohn, S. W. & Foss, K. A. (2008). *Theories of Human Communication*. USA: Lyn Uhl.
- McQuail's, D. (2000). *Mass Communication Theory*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Miller, K. (2005). *Communication Theories, Perspectives, Processes, and Contexts*. Singapore: Mc Graw – Hill.
- Mosco, V. (1996). *The political Economy of Communication, Rethinking and Renewal*. London: Sage Publications.
- Watt, J. H. & VanLear, C. A. (ed.). (1996). *Dynamic Patterns in Communication Processes*. Thousand Oaks California: Sage Publications.
- Webster, F. (2002). *Theories of the Information Society*. London and New York: Routledge
- Wimmer, R. D. & Domminick, J. R. (2006). *Mass Media Research: An Introduction*. USA: Thomson Wadsworth.